Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 20

# Flashbacks

Chapter: 127

(Flashback text- video message.) ≈ Memories of Karly… ≈

Part: 1

Memories

I get a new text message- and there is a photo attached- and there it is Maggie, spared, showing off her new butt plug in her hole… making it push in and out as she squeezes down hard on it… it is pink! And oh, so sparkly she said! And she is playing with herself- also.

I love this video. I have it…

It is on my pc now… with all the porn… and sh*t of here young sex ass!

Something they all knew after I passed… I was… um… living a fake and gay life… take that any way you want to… It is all good for me now. Cute for she was born in 2000, and she calls me old for I was born in the late- 1990's… 1998- for a fact.

(Now)

My vision is cloudy. I can barely make out the banisters. I am tripping, half falling down the stairs, finding the front door by touch. I think

Hanna might be calling to me, but everything is lost to a roaring, rushing in my ears, inside my head. Sunshine, brilliant, brilliant white light-cool biting iron under my fingers, the gate-ocean smells, gasoline.

Wailing, growing louder. A punctuated shriek: beep, beep, beep.

My head clears all at once and I jump out of the middle of the street just before I am squashed by a police car, which barrels past me, horn still blaring, siren whirling, leaving me coughing up dirt and dust. The ache in my throat gets so bad it feels like I am

gagging, and when I finally let the tears come, it is a huge relief, like dropping something heavy after you have been carrying it for a long time. Once I start crying, I cannot stop, and all the way home I must keep mashing my palm into my eyes every few seconds, smearing away the tears just so

I can see where I am going. I comfort myself by thinking that in less than two months this will seem like nothing to me.

All of it will fall away and I will rise new and free, like a bird winging up into the air.

Part: 2

Lasting images

That is what Hanna does not understand, has never understood. For some of us, it is about more than the deliria. Some of us, the lucky ones, will get the chance to be reborn: newer, fresher, better. Healed, whole, and perfect again, like a misshapen slab of iron that comes out of the fire glowing, glittering, razor-sharp.

That is all I want; all I have ever wanted. That is the promise of the cure.

Lord-

Suspicious minds-

Keep our hearts fixed as you fixed the planets in their orbits and cooled the chaos of emerging-

As the gravity of your will keeps star and star from Collapsing… Keeps the ocean from turning to dust and dust from turning to water… Keeps planets from colliding… And suns from exploding-

So, Lord, keep our hearts fixed in the steady orbit and help them stay on the path.

-Psalm 21 plays over in my mind…

That night, even after I am in bed, Hana's words replay themselves endlessly in my head. You will not end up like her. You do not have it in you. She only said it to comfort me, I know it should be reassuring-but for some reason it is not. For some reason, it makes me upset; there is a deep aching in my chest, as though something large, cold, and sharp is lodged there.

Here is another thing Hana does not understand: Thinking about the disease, and worrying about it, and stressing about whether I have inherited some predisposition for it-that is all I have of my mom. The

disease is what I know about her. Here is the link…

Otherwise, I have nothing.

It is not that I do not have memories of her. I do lots of them, considering how young I was when she died. I remember that when there was fresh snow, she would send me outside to pack pans with handfuls of it. Once inside we would drizzle maple syrup into the snow-filled pans, watching it harden into amber candy instantly, all loops and fragile, sugared filigree, like edible lace. I remember how much she loved to sing to us as she bounced me

in the water at the beach off Eastern Prom.

I did not know how strange this was at the time. Other mothers teach their children to swim. Other mothers bounce their babies in the water and apply sunscreen to make sure their babies do not burn and do all the things that a mother is supposed to do, as outlined in the book of hush-hush- But they do not sing.

I remember that she brought me trays of buttered toast when I was sick and kissed my bruises when I fell, and I remember once when she lifted

me to my feet after I fell off my bike and began to rock me in her arms, a woman gasped and said to her, ‘You should be ashamed of yourself,’ and I did not understand why which made me cry harder. After that, she comforted me only in private. In public, she would just frown and say,

‘You’re okay, Lena. Get up.’

We used to have dance parties too. My mother called them ‘sock jams,’ because we would roll up the carpets in the living room and put on our thickest socks and slip and slide along the wooden hallways.

Part: 3

Always on my mind

Evan Rachel joined in, though she always claimed to be too old for baby games.

My mom would draw the curtains and wedge pillows under the front and back doors and turn up the music. We laughed so hard I always went to bed with a stomachache.

Eventually, I understood that on our sock-jam nights she would close the curtains to prevent us from being seen by passing patrols, that she had stopped up the doors with pillows so

that the neighbors would not report us for playing music and laughing too much, both potential warning signs of the deliria.

I understood that she used to tuck my father’s military pin- a silver dagger he had inherited from his father, which she wore every day on a chain around her neck-beneath the collar of her shirt whenever we left the house, so no one would see it and become suspicious. I understood that all the happiest moments of my childhood were a lie.

They were wrong, unsafe, and illegal.

They were freakish. My mother was freakish, and I had inherited the freakishness from her.

For the first time, I wonder what she must have been feeling, thinking, the night she walked out to the cliffs and kept walking, feet pedaling the air. I wonder whether she was scared. I wonder whether she thought of me or Rachel… I wonder whether she was sorry for leaving us behind.

I start thinking about my father, too. I do not remember him at all, though I have some dim, ancient impression of two warm, rough hands and a large looming face floating above mine. That is just because my mother kept a framed portrait in her bedroom of my father and me. I was only a few months old, and he was holding me, smiling, looking at the camera. But there is no way I am remembering for real. I was not even a year old when he died.

Cancer…!

(Flashback)

Karly- Maggie just loves wearing my class ring, that has a 1950’s look gold with a silver inlay, and the band swatter that I gave up for Jenny and the girls- Just to be popular- as you no band is not cool when you do something more than they can… that is red- white- and blue… yes, it has my name on it- yet they all think it was for she has nothing- ha it for the fact I love her. Little do they all know.

Part: 4

Media

Twitter: @Olivia- ‘Showing her puss- puss- nice, no? I am not that

slutty!’ Ha- love her!!!! You can see all her puss pics on Instagram also… the boys love- for reals. That is what it is all about the boys and popularity- and who hooks up with whom… grade freak that… I want to be laid- not the grade. That is how I thought then.

(Now)

Girl boy girl in- bad- rubbing- licking- kissing sucking- his head.

The heat is horrible, thick, clotting on the walls. Kellie is rolled over on her back, arms and legs flung open on top of her comforter, breathing silently with her mouth gaping open.

Hanna is fast asleep, murmuring soundlessly into her pillow. The whole room smells like a wet exhalation, skin and tongues, and warm milk.

I ease out of bed, already dressed in black jeans and a T-shirt. I did not even bother to change into my pajamas. I knew I would never be able to sleep tonight. And earlier in the evening, I had come to a decision. I was sitting at the dinner table with Carol and Uncle William, Jenny, and Grace, while everyone chewed and swallowed in silence, staring blankly at one another, feeling as though the air was weighing down on me, constricting my

breath, like two fists squeezing tighter and tighter around a water balloon, when I realized something.

Hanna said I did not have it in me, but she was wrong.

My heart is beating so loudly I can hear it, and I am positive that everyone else will too-that it will make my aunt sit bolt upright in her bed, ready to catch me and accuse me of trying to sneak out.

Which is, of course, exactly what I am trying to do. I did not even know a heart could beat so loudly, and it reminds me of an Edgar Allan Poe

story we had to read in one of our social studies classes, about this guy who kills this other guy and then gives himself up to the police because he is convinced, he can hear the dead guy's heart beating up from beneath his floorboards. It is supposed to be a story about guilt and the dangers of civil disobedience, but when I first read it, I thought it seemed lame and melodramatic. Now I get it, though. Poe must have snuck out a lot when he was young.

I ease open the bedroom door, holding my breath, praying it does not squeak. At one point Jenny lets out a

shout and my heart freezes. But then she rolls over, flinging one arm across her pillow, and I exhale slowly, realizing she is just fussing in her sleep.

The hall is dark. The room my aunt and uncle share- like is- dark too, and the only sound comes from the whispering of the trees outside and the low ticks and groans from the walls, the usual old house arthritic noises. I finally worked up the courage to slip out into the hall and slide the bedroom door shut behind me. I go so slowly that it almost feels like I am not moving at all, feeling my way by the bumps and

ripples in the wallpaper over to the stairs, then sliding my hand inch by inch over the banister, walking on my very tiptoes. Even so, it seems like the house is fighting me like it is just screaming for me to be caught. Every step seems to creak, or shriek, or moan.

Part: 5

Socializing

Liv on- Instagram- ‘You’ll- like- be seeing a lot of here in the upcoming slideshow! Cute but- OMG!’

I think Jenny too wide and sh*t, and raunchy sluty to show those… you-

have seen here photos by now… what did you think… cute…??? Or am I the cutest?

Snap-chat me for 1,000 tokens, and you have it for life!

All single floorboard quivers and shudders under my feet, and I start mentally bargaining with the house: If I make it to the front door without waking up mom, would- I swear to God I will never slam another door. I will never call you ‘an old piece of turd’ again, not even in my head, and I will never curse the basement when it floods, and I will never, ever, ever kick

the bedroom wall when I am annoyed at Jenny.

The house hears me, because, miraculously, I do make it to the front door. I pause for a second longer, listening for the sounds of footsteps upstairs, whispered voices, anything- but other than my heart, which is still going strong and loud, it is silent.

Even the house seems to hesitate and take a breath, because the front door swings open with barely a whisper, and in the last second before I slip out into the night the rooms behind me are as dark and still as a grave.

Outside, I hesitate on the front stoop.

The fireworks stopped an hour ago- I heard the last stuttering explosions, like distant gunfire, just as I was getting ready for bed and now the streets are strangely silent and empty. It is a little after eleven o’clock. Some courses must be lingering at the Eastern Prom.

Part: 6

Nocturnal

Everyone else is home by now. Not a single light is burning on the street. All the streetlamps were

disabled years ago, except in the richest parts of Pittsburgh, and they look to me like blinded eyes. Thank God, the moon is so bright.

I strain to detect the sounds of passing patrols or groups of regulators - I almost hope I do, because then I will have to go back inside, to my bed, to safety, and already the panic is starting to drill through me again. But everything is perfectly still and quiet, like it is frozen. Everything rational, right, and good is screaming for me to turn around and go upstairs, but some stubborn inner center keeps me moving forward.

I go down the walk and unchain my bike from the gate.

My bike rattles a little bit, particularly when you first start pedaling, so I walk it some ways down the street. The wheels tick reassuringly over the pavement.

I have never been out this late on my own in my life. I have never broken curfew. But alongside the fear- which is always there, of course, that constant crushing weight is a small, flickering feeling of excitement that works its way up and underneath the fear, pushing it back some. Like, it is

okay, I am all right, I can do this. I am just a girl-an an in-between girl, five-two, nothing special- but I can do this, and all the curfews and the patrols in the world are not stopping me.

It is amazing how much comfort this thought gives me. It is amazing how it breaks up the fear, as a tiny candle lit in the middle of the night, lighting up the shapes of things, burning away the dark.

When I reach the end of my street I hop up on my bike, feeling the gears shudder into place. The breeze feels good as I start pedaling, careful

not to go too quickly, staying alert in case there are regulators nearby. Fortunately, Stroud water and Roaring Brooke Farms are in the exact opposite direction from the

Fourth of July celebrations at Eastern Prom.

Once- I get to the broad swath of farmland that surrounds Pittsburgh like a belt, I should be okay. The farms and slaughterhouses rarely get patrolled. But first I must make it through the West End, where rich people like Hanna live, through the old

town, and over the Fore River at Bridge Street.

Thankfully, each street I turn down is empty.

Stroud-water is a good thirty minutes away, even if I am biking quickly. As I get off- peninsula- moving away from the buildings and businesses of downtown Pittsburgh and onto the more suburban mainland-the houses get smaller and farther apart, set back on weedy, patchy yards. This is not rural Pittsburgh yet, but there are signs of the countryside creeping in: plants poking up through half-rotted porches,

an owl hooting mournfully in the dark, a black scythe of bats cutting suddenly across the sky. All these houses have cars in front of them just like the richer houses in, Northern End-but these have been salvaged from the junkyards.

They are mounted on cinder blocks and covered in rust. I pass one that has a tree growing straight through its sunroof, like the car has just dropped out of the sky and been impaled there, and another one, hood open, missing its engine. As I go past, a cat startles up out of its black cavity, meowing, blinking at me.

After I cross the Fore River the houses fall away altogether, and it is just field after field and farm after farm, with names like Meadow Lane and Sheep Bay and oak's part by the river, which make them sound all homey and nice: places where someone might be baking muffins and skimming fresh cream for butter.

Across the fields I see the low, dark silhouettes of barns and silos, some of them brand-new, some of them barely standing, clinging to the earth like teeth Digging into something. The air smells slightly sweet, like growing things and manure.

But… but… but… but… um…

Most of the farms are owned by big corporations, packed with livestock, and often staffed by orphans.

I have always liked it out here, but it is freaky in the dark, open, and empty, and I cannot help but think that if I did come across a patrol there would be no place to hide, no alley to turn down.

Roaring Brooke’s Farms is right next to the southwestern border of the town. It has been abandoned for years since half the main building and

both grain silos were destroyed in a fire.

About five minutes before I get there, I think I can make out a rhythm drumming imperceptibly under the throaty song of the crickets, but for a while, I am not sure if I am just imagining it or only hearing my heart, which has started pounding again.

Farther on, though, and, I am sure. Even before I reach the little dirt road that leads down to the barn-or at least, the portion of the barn that is still standing- strains of music spring up, crystallizing in the night air like rain

turning suddenly to snow, drifting to earth.

Now I am scared again. All I can think is wrong, wrong, wrong, a word that drums in my head. Mom would kill me if she knew what I was doing.

~*~

Kill- me or have me thrown into the Burial chamber or taken to the labs for an early procedure, willow, and oak marks–style.

I hop off my bike when I see the turnoff to Roaring Brooke, and the big metal sign staked in the ground

that reads PROPERTY OF Pittsburgh, NO TRESPASSING. I wheel my bike some little ways, into the woods at the side of the road. The actual farmhouse and the old barn are still five or six hundred feet down the road, but I do not want to bring my bike any farther. I do not lock it up, though. I do not even want to think about what would happen if there was a raid, but if there is, I am not going to want to be fumbling with a lock in the half-dark. I will need speed.

I step around the NO TRESPASSING sign.

I am getting to be quite the expert at ignoring them, I realize, remembering how Hana and I hopped the gate at the labs. It is the first time I have thought about that afternoon in a while, and right then a vision of Alex rises in front of me, a memory of seeing him on the observation deck, head tilted back and laughing.

I must focus on the land around me, the brightness of the moon, the wildflowers on the road. It helps me beat back the feeling that I am going to be sick at any second. I do not know what compelled me out of the house, why I felt like I had to prove Hana

wrong about something, and I am trying to ignore the idea-way more disturbing than anything else-that my argument with Hana was just an excuse.

That may be, deep down, I was simply curious.

Someone is singing: a beautiful voice as thick and heavy as warm honey, spilling up and down a scale so quickly I feel dizzy just listening.

That music was metallic and awful, fuzzy through the speakers. The music that is playing underneath the voice is strange and clashing and wild-

but nothing like the wailing and scratching that I heard Hana playing on her computer earlier today, though I recognize certain similarities, certain patterns of melody and rhythm.

This music ebbs and flows, irregular, sad. It reminds me, weirdly, of watching the ocean during a bad storm, the lashing, crashing waves, and the spray of sea foam against the docks; the way it takes your breath away, the power, and the hugeness of it. I am not feeling curious now. I am feeling scared. And very, very stupid.

The farmhouse and the old barn are positioned in a dip of land between two hills, a mini valley, like the constructions, are sitting right in the middle of somebody's pursed lips. Because of the way the land slopes I cannot see the farmhouse yet, but as I get closer to the top of the hill the music gets clearer, louder. It is like nothing I have ever heard before. It is not like- the authorized music you can download off LAM, prim and harmonious and structured, the kind of music that gets played in the bandshell in Deering Oaks Park during official summer concerts.

That is exactly what happens as I listen to the music, as I come up over the final crest of a hill, and the half-ruined barn and collapsing farmhouse fan out in front of me, just as the music swells, a wave about to break: The breath leaves my body all at once, and I am struck dumb by the beauty of it. For a second it seems to me like I am looking down at the ocean- a sea of people, writing and dancing in the light spilling down from the barn- like shadows twisting up around a flame.

The barn is completely gutted: split open and blackened by the fire,

exposed to the elements. Only half of it is left standing fragments of three walls, a portion of the roof, part of an elevated platform that must once have been used to store hay. That is where the band is playing. Thin, stalky trees have begun pushing up in the fields. Older trees seared completely white from the fire and bald of branches and leaves, point-like ghostly fingers to the sky.

Fifty feet beyond the barn, I see the low fringe of blackness where the unregulated land begins. The Wilds. I cannot make out the border fence from this distance, but I imagine I can

feel it and can sense the electricity buzzing through the air. I have only been close to the border fence a few times. Once with my mother years ago, when she made me listen to the zipping of the electricity-a current so strong the air seems to hum with it; you can get a shock just from standing four feet away-and promise never, ever, ever to touch it.

She told me that when the cure was first made mandatory, some people tried to escape over the border. They never put more than a hand on the fence before being fried like bacon - I

remember that is exactly what she said, like bacon.

Since then, I have run alongside it with Hanna a few times, always careful to stay a good ten feet away.

In the barn, someone has set up speakers and amps and even two enormous, industrial-sized lamps, which make everyone close to the stage look starkly white and hyper-real, and everyone else dark and indistinct, blurry.

A song ends and the crowd roars together with an ocean sound. I

think they must be mooching power from a grid on one of the other farms. I think, this is stupid, I will never find Hana, there are too many people and then a new song starts, this one just as wild and beautiful, and it is like the music reaches across all that black space and pulls at something at the very heart and root of me, plucking me like a string. I head down the hill toward the barn. The weird thing is I do not choose to do it.

My feet just go on their own, as though they have happened on some invisible track and it is all just slide, photograph, print.

For a moment, I forget that I am supposed to be looking for Hana. I feel as though I am in a dream, where strange things are happening, but they do not feel strange. Everything is cloudy- everything is wrapped in a fog, and I am filled from head to toe with the single, burning desire to get closer to the music, to hear the music better, for the music to go on and on and on.

'Kellie! Oh my God, Kell!' Hearing my name snaps me out of my daze, and I am suddenly aware that I am standing in a huge crush of people.

No. Not just people. Boys. And girls.

Uncured, all of them, without a hint of a blemish on their necks-at least the ones standing close enough for me to scope out. Children talking. Children laughing. Children sharing sips from the same cup. Suddenly,

I think I might faint.

Hanna is barreling toward me, elbowing people out of the way, and before I can even open my mouth, she is jumping on top of me as she did at graduation, squeezing me in a hug. I

am so startled I stumble backward, nearly falling over.

‘You’re here.’

She pulls away and stares at me, keeping her hands on my shoulders. ‘You’re here.’

Another song ends, and the lead singer -a tiny girl with long black hair- calls out something about a break. As my brain slowly reboots, I have the dumbest thought: She is even shorter than I am, and she is singing in front of five hundred people.

Then I think, five hundred people, five hundred people, what am I doing here with five hundred people?

‘I can’t stay,’ I say quickly. The moment the words are out of my mouth I feel relieved. Whatever I came here to prove has been proven; now I can go. I need to get out of this crowd, the babble of voices, a shifting wall of chests, and shoulders all around me. I was too wrapped up in the music earlier to look around, but now I have the sensation of colors and perfumes and hands twisting and turning around us.

‘Lena,’ she says, ‘this is my friend Drew.’ She looks guilty for just a second, but then the smile is back on her face, as wide as ever like we are standing in the middle of St. Paul’s talking about a bio quiz.

Hana opens her mouth- to object-but at that second, we are interrupted. A boy with dirty blond hair falling into his eyes pushes his way over to us, carrying two big plastic cups. The dirty-blond-hair boy passes a cup to Hana. She takes it, thanks to him, and then turns back to me.

~*~

I open my mouth, but no words come out, which is a good thing, considering that there is a giant fire alarm going off in my head. It may sound stupid and naive, but not once when I was heading to the farms did, I even consider that the party would be coed. It did not even occur to me.

Breaking curfew is one thing; listening to unapproved music is even worse. But breaking segregation laws is one of the worst offenses there is. Thus, Willow Marks early procedure and the graffiti scrawled on her house; thus, the fact that Chelsea Brown was kicked out of school after being found breaking

curfew with a boy from Spencer, and her parents were mysteriously fired, and her whole family was forced to vacate their house. And- at least in Chelsea's case- there was not even any proof. Just a rumor going around.

Drew gives me a half-wave. ‘Hey, Liv…’

My mouth opens and closes… Still no sound… For a second, we stand there in awkward silence. Then he extends a cup to me, a sudden, jerky gesture.

‘Whiskey…?’

‘Whiskey…?’ I squeak back… I have only had alcohol a few times… At Christmas, when mom pours me a quarter glass of wine, and once at Hana’s house when we stole some blackberry liqueur from her parent’s liquor cabinet and drank until the ceiling started spinning overhead.

Hanna was laughing and giggling, but I did not like it, did not like the sweet sick taste in my mouth, or the way my thoughts seemed to break apart like a mist in the sun. Out of control- that is what it was, that is what I hated.

Drew shrugs. ‘It’s all they had.

Vodka always goes first at these things.’ At this things-as in, these things happen, as in, more than once.

‘No.’ I try to shove the cup back at him. ‘Take it.’

He waves me away, obviously misunderstanding. ‘It’s cool. I’ll just get another.’

Drew smiles quickly at Hanna before disappearing into the crowd. I like his smile, the way it rises crookedly toward his left ear- but as I realize I am thinking about liking his smile, I feel the panic winging its way through me,

beating through my blood, a lifetime of whispers and accusations.

Control. It is all about control.

‘I have to go,’ I managed to say to Hanna. Progress.

‘Go?’ She wrinkled her forehead up.

‘You walk out here-’

‘I biked.’

I pretend to shiver so she does not feel bad, wondering why it feels so awkward to talk to her. This is my best friend, the girl I have known since second grade, the girl who used to split

her cookies with me at lunch, and once put her fist in Jillian Dawson's face after Jillian said my family was diseased.

'I'm tired,' I say. 'And I shouldn't be here.' I want to say, you should not be here either, but I stop myself.

'Whatever, you bike out here and then you're just going to go?'

Hanna reaches for my hand, but I cross my arms quickly to avoid her. She looks momentarily hurt.

Part: 7

Gracelessness

‘Did you hear the band? They’re amazing, aren’t they?’ Hanna’s being too nice, un- Hanna, and I feel a deep, sharp pain in my ribs. She is trying to be polite. She is acting like we are strangers. She feels the awkwardness too.

‘I- I wasn’t listening.’ For some reason, I do not want Hanna to know that yes, I heard, and yes, I thought they were amazing, better than amazing.

It is too private- embarrassing even, something to be ashamed of, and

even though I came to Roaring Brooke Farms, and broke curfew and everything, just to see her and apologize, the feeling- I had earlier today returns to me: I do not know Hanna anymore, and she does not know me.

I am used to a feeling of double-ness, of thinking one thing and having to do another, a constant tug-of-war. But somehow Hanna has fallen cleanly away into the double half, the other world, the world of unmentionable thoughts and things and people.

Is it possible that all this time I have been living my life, studying for tests, taking long runs with Hana-and this other world has just existed, running alongside and underneath mine, alive, ready to sneak out of the shadows and the alleyways as soon as the sun goes down? Illegal parties, unapproved music, people touching one another with no fear of the disease, with no fear for themselves.

A world without fear.

Impossible.

And even though I am standing in the middle of the biggest crowd I

have ever seen in my life; I suddenly feel very alone.

‘Stay,’ Hana says quietly. Even though it is a command, there is a hesitation in her voice, like she is asking a question.

‘You can catch the second set.’

I shake my head. I wish I had not come.

I wish I had not seen this. I wish I did not know what I know now, could wake up tomorrow and ride over to

Hanna’s house could lie out at Eastern Prom with her and complain about how boring summers are like we always do.

I could believe that nothing had changed.

‘I’m going to go,’ I say, wishing my voice did not come out shaky. ‘It’s all right, though. You can stay.’

The second I say it; I realize she never offered to come back with me. She is looking at me with the weirdest mixture of regret and pity.

‘I can come back with you if you want,’ she says, but I can tell she is

only offering now to make me feel better. ‘No, no. I’ll be fine.’ My cheeks are burning, and I take a step back, desperate to get out of there. I bump against someone-a boy who turns and smiles at me. I step quickly away from him.

‘Lena, wait.’ Hana goes to grab me again. Even though she already has a drink, I shove my cup in her free hand, so she must pause, momentarily frowning as she tries to juggle both drinks into the crook of an elbow, and in that second, I dance backward out of her reach.

‘I’ll be fine, I promise. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.’ Then I am slipping through a narrow space between two people- that is the only benefit of being five-two, you have a good vantage point on all the in-between spaces-and before I know it, Hana has dropped behind me, swallowed up by the crowd. I weave a path away from the barn, keeping my eyes down, hoping my cheeks cool off fast.

Images swirl by, a blur, making me feel like I am dreaming again. Boy. Girl.

Boy/Girl. Laughing, shoving each other, touching each other's hair. I've never, not once in my whole life, felt so different and out of place. There is a high, mechanized shriek, and then the band starts playing again, but this time the music does nothing for me. I do not even pause. I just keep walking, heading for the hill, imagining the cool silence of the starlit fields, the familiar dark streets of Pittsburgh, the regular rhythm of the patrols, marching quietly coordinated, the feedback from the regulators' walkie-talkies- regular, normal, familiar, mine.

Finally, the crowd starts thinning. It was hot, pressed up against so many people, and the breeze stings my skin, cools my cheeks. I have started to calm down a little, and at the edge of the crowd, I allow myself one look back at the stage. The barn, open to the sky and the night and glowing white with light, reminds me of a palm cupping a small bit of fire.

‘Kellie!’

It is strange how I instantly recognize the voice even though I have heard it only once before, for ten minutes, fifteen tops -it is the laughter

that runs underneath it, like someone leaning in to let you in on a good secret in the middle of a boring class.

My vision does its camera-zooming in focus again, and all I see is Ray, shouldering his way out of the crowd toward me.

‘Liv! Wait!’

A brief flash of terror zips through me -for a wild second, I think he must be here as part of a patrol, as a raiding group or something- but then I see he is dressed normally, in jeans and his scuffed-up sneakers with the ink-

blue laces and a faded T-shirt.

Everything freezes…

The blood stops flowing in my veins, my breath stops coming also. For a second even the music falls away and all I hear is something steady and quiet and pretty, like the distant beat of a drum, and I think, I am hearing my heart, except I know that is impossible because my heart has stopped too.

‘What are you doing here?’ I stammer out as he catches up with me.

He grins at me- ‘Nice to see you too.’

He has left a few feet of distance between us, and I am glad. In the half-light, I cannot make out the color of his eyes and I do not need to be distracted right now, do not need to feel the way I did at the labs when he leaned in to whisper to me- the total awareness of the bare inch that separated his mouth from my ear, terror, guilt, and excitement all at once.

'I'm serious.' I do my best to scowl at him.

'But you can't…' I am struggling to find words, not sure how

to say what I want to say. ‘But then again this is…’

‘Illegal…?’ He shrugs… His smile falters, though it does not disappear entirely. He blows air out of his lips. ‘I came to hear the music,’ he says. ‘Like everybody else.’

One strand of hair curls down over his left eye, and when he turns to scan the party, it catches the light from the stage and winks that crazy golden-brown color. ‘It’s okay,’ he says, quieter so that I must lean forward to hear him over the music.

‘Nobody’s hurting anybody.’

You do not know what I start to say, but the way his words are just edged with sadness stops me.

Part: 8

Snaps

Olivia tweets- Tell me how pretty it is, #p*ssy-pic.

Kiss me here Kellie…

He is only regretful for the things he lost after the cure. Music does not move people the same way, for example, and while he should have been cured of feelings of regret, too, the procedure works differently for

everybody, and it is not always perfect. Ray runs a hand through his hair, and I make out the small, dark, three-pronged scar behind his left ear, perfectly symmetrical.

That is why my aunt and uncle sometimes still dream. That is why my cousin Marcella used to find herself crying hysterically, with no warning or apparent cause.

‘So, what about you?’ He turns back to me, and the smile is on again, and the teasing, winking quality of his voice.

‘What’s your excuse?’

‘I didn’t want to come,’ I said quickly.

‘I had to-’ I break off, realizing I am not sure why I had to come. ‘I had to give something to someone,’ I say finally.

He raises his eyebrows, clearly unimpressed. I rush on, ‘To Hanna. My friend. You met her the other day.’

‘I remember,’ he says.

‘For standing me up.’ One corner of his mouth hitches higher, and again I have the feeling that he is sharing some delicious secret with me, that he is trying to tell me something.

‘You were a no-show at Back and Gold Cove that day.’

I have never seen anyone maintain a smile for so long. It is like his face is naturally molded that way. ‘You haven’t said you’re sorry yet.’

‘For what?’ The crowd has continued to press closer to the stage, so Ray and I are no longer surrounded by people.

Occasionally, someone walks by, swinging a bottle of something or singing along, slightly off-key, but we are alone.

I felt a burst of triumph-he was waiting for me at Back and Gold Cove! He did want me to meet him! At the same time, the anxiety blooms inside of me. He wants something from me. I am not sure what it is, but I can sense it, and it makes me afraid.

'So?' He folds his arms and rocks back on his heels, still smiling. 'Are you going to apologize, or what?'

His easiness and self-assurance aggravate me; just like they did at the labs. It is so unfair, so different from how I feel like I am about to have a heart attack or melt into a puddle.

‘I don’t apologize to liars,’ I say, surprised by how steady my voice sounds.

He winces. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Come on.’ I roll my eyes, feeling increasingly confident by the second. ‘You lied about seeing me at evaluations. You lied about recognizing me.’ I am ticking his lies off on my fingers. ‘You lied about even being inside the labs on Evaluation Day.’

‘Okay, okay.’

To keep the process ‘pure’ or something, I do not know. But I needed

a cup of coffee, and there is this machine on the second floor of the C complex that has the good kind, with real milk and everything, so I used my code to get in. He holds up both hands.

'I'm sorry, okay? Look, I'm the one who should apologize.' He stares at me for a second and then sighs. 'I told you, security isn't allowed in the labs during evaluations. That is, it.

End of story.

And afterward, I had to lie about it. I could lose my job. And I only work at the stupid labs to subsidize my school -' He trails off. For once he does

not look confident. He looks worried like he is scared I might tell on him.

‘So why were you on the observation deck?’ I press on… ‘Why are you watching me?’

‘I didn’t even make it to the second floor,’ he says. He is staring at me closely, as though judging my reaction.

‘I came inside, and-and- I just heard this crazy noise. That rushing, roaring sound.

And something else, too. Screaming or something.’

I close my eyes briefly, recalling the feeling of the burning white lights, my impression of hearing the ocean pounding outside the labs, of hearing my mother scream across the distance of a decade. When I open them again, Ray is still watching me.

‘Anyway, I had no idea what was going on. I thought- I do not know, it is stupid, but I thought the labs where under attack or something. And then as I am standing there, suddenly there is, like, a hundred cows charging me.’ He shrugs. ‘There was a staircase to my left. I freaked out and booked it. Figured cows don’t climb stairs.’ A

smile appears again, this time fleeting, tentative. ‘I ended up on the observation deck.’

A perfectly normal, reasonable explanation. I feel relieved, and less frightened of him now. At the same time, something is working under my chest, a dull feeling, a disappointment.

And some stubbornness, a part of me that still doubts him. I remember the way he looked on the observation deck, head tilted back, laughing; the way he winked at me. The way he looked amused, confident, happy. Unafraid. A world without fear-

‘So-o, you don’t know anything about how-how it happened?’ I cannot believe I am being so bold. I ball up my fists and squeeze, hoping he does not notice the sudden strangled sound of my voice.

‘The mix-up in the deliveries, you mean?’ He says it smoothly, without a pause or a break in his voice, and the last of my doubts vanish. Just like any cure, he does not question the official story. ‘I wasn’t in charge of signing for deliveries that day. The guy who was- Sal-was fired. You are supposed to check the cargo. He skipped that step.’ He cocks his head to

one side, spreads his hands. ‘Satisfied now?’

‘Satisfied,’ I say. But the pressure in my chest is still there. Even though earlier I was desperate to be out of the house, now I just wish I could blink and be home, sitting up in bed, pushing the covers off my legs, realizing that everything-the party, seeing Ray- was a dream.

‘So -?’ He tilts his head back toward the barn. The band is playing something loud and fast-paced. I do not know why the music appealed to me before. It just seems like noise now-

rushing noise. ‘Think we can get closer without getting trampled?’

I ignore the fact that he has just said ‘we,’ a word that for some reason sounds amazingly appealing when pronounced with his lilting, laughing accent. ‘Actually, I was just heading home.’ I realize I am angry at him without knowing why for not being what I thought he was, I guess, even though I should be grateful that he is normal, and cured, and safe.

‘Heading home?’ he repeats disbelievingly. ‘You can’t go home.’ I have always been careful not to let

myself give in to feelings of anger or irritation. I cannot afford to stay at Carol's house. I owe her too much and besides, after the few tantrums I threw as a child, I hated the way she looked at me sideways for days, as though analyzing me, measuring me. I knew she was thinking, just like her mother. But now I give in, let the anger surge. I am sick of people acting like this world, this other world, is the normal one, while I am the freak. It is not fair: like all the rules have suddenly been changed and somebody forgot to tell me.

‘I can, and I am.’ I turn around and start heading up the hill, figuring he will leave me alone. To my surprise, he does not.

‘Wait!’ He comes bounding up the hill after me.

‘What are you doing?’ I whirl around to face him again, surprised by how confident I sound, considering that my heart is rushing, tumbling.

This is the secret to talking to boys-you just must be angry all the time.

‘What do you mean?’ We are both slightly out of breath from hoofing

it up the hill, but he still manages a smile. ‘I just want to talk to you.’

‘You’re following me.’ I cross my arms, which helps me feel as though I am closing off space between us. ‘You’re following me again.’ There it is… He starts backward, and I get a momentary, sick twinge of pleasure, that I have surprised him. ‘Again…?’ He repeats… I am glad that for once, I am not the one stuttering, or struggling to find words.

The words fly out: ‘I think it’s a little bit strange that I go my whole life without seeing you, and then suddenly I

start seeing you everywhere.’ I had not planned to say this-it had not struck me as strange-but the second the words are out of my mouth I realize they are true.

He is going to be angry, but to my surprise he tips his head back and laughs, long and loud, moonlight turning the curve of his cheeks and chin and nose silver. I am so surprised by his reaction I just stand there, staring at him. Finally, he looks at me. Even though I still cannot make out his eyes-the moon draws everything starkly, highlighting it in bright, crystalline silver or leaving it in

blackness- I have the impression of heat, and light, the same impression I had that day at the labs.

‘Maybe you just haven’t been paying attention,’ he says quietly, rocking forward slightly on his heels.

I take an unconscious, half-shuffling step backward. I find myself frightened by his closeness; by the fact that even though our bodies are separated by several inches I feel as though we are touching.

‘What-what do you mean?’

‘I mean that you’re wrong.’ He pauses, watching me, and I struggle to

keep my face composed, even though I can feel my left eye straining and fluttering. Hopefully, in the darkness, he cannot tell. ‘We’ve seen each other plenty.’

Part: 9

Immature

‘I would remember if we’d met before.’

‘I didn’t say that we’d met.’ He does not try to close the new distance between us, and I am grateful, at least, for that. He chews on the corner of a lip-a gesture that makes him look younger.

‘Let me ask you a question,’ he goes on.

‘How come you don’t run past the

Governor anymore?’

Without meaning to, I gasp a little.

‘How do you know about the

Governor?’

‘I take classes at IUP,’ he says.

The University of Pittsburgh-I remembers now, the afternoon we walked up to see the ocean from the back of the lab complex, hearing bits of

his conversation floating back to me on the wind. He did say he was a student. ‘I worked at the Grind last semester, in Monument Square. I used to see you all the time.’ My mouth opens and shuts. No words come out; my brain goes on lockdown whenever I need it the most.

Of course, I know the Grind; Hana and I used to run past it two, three times a week, watching the college students float in and out like drifting snowflakes, blowing the steam from the top of their cups. The Grind looks out onto a small square, all cobblestone, called Monument Square:

It marks the halfway point of one of the six-mile routes I used to do all the time.

In its center is a statue of a man, half-eroded from snow and weather, and scrawled over with a few looping curls of graffiti. He is striding forward, one hand holding his hat on his head so that it looks like he is walking through a horrible storm or a headwind. His other fist is extended in front of him. It is obvious that he was, in the distant past, holding something-a torch- but at some point, that portion of the statue was broken or stolen. So now the Governor strides forward with an empty fist, a circular hole cut in his

hand, a perfect hiding place for notes and secret stuff.

Hanna and I and she used to check his fist sometimes, to see if there was anything good inside. Nonetheless, there weren’t-just a few pieces of wadded-up chewing gum and some coins.

Part: 10

Infidelities

(Past- chatting)

I never got this by liv like to cummie- with little almost- no make on- or not fixed up not like pride- and sh*t-

for she said, ‘Like kar- if a boy wants to see me cummie- he- we have to love me like this… I am doing this at home in my room- like the way I want too. They’ll look regardless.’ Not me at all in my thinking- but okay.

#- Hashtag: (Girlie talk’n)

(Now)

I do not know when Hana and I started calling him the Governor, or why. The wind and rain have rubbed the plaque at the base of the statue indecipherable. No one else calls him that. Everyone else just says, ‘The statue at Monument Square.’ Ray must

have overheard us talking about the Governor one day.

Ray is still looking at me, waiting, and I realize, I never answered his question. ‘I have to switch my routes up,’ I say, I have not run past the Governor since March or April. ‘It gets boring.’ And then, because I cannot help it,

I squeak out, ‘You remember me?’

He laughs… ‘You were pretty hard to miss. You used to run around the statue and do this jumping, whooping thing.’ Heat creeps up my

neck and cheeks. I must be going a deep red again, and I thank God for the fact that we have moved away from the stage lights. I completely forgot; I used to jump up and try to high-five the Governor as Hanna and I and she ran past, a way of psyching myself up for the run back to school.

Sometimes we would even scream out, ‘Halena!’ We must have looked completely crazy.

‘I don’t-’ I lick my lips, fumbling for an explanation that will not sound ridiculous. ‘When you run you sometimes do weird things.

Because of the endorphins. It is like a drug, you know. Messes with your brain.'

'I liked it,' he says. 'You looked -' He trails off for a moment. His face contracts slightly, a tiny shift I can barely make out in the dark, but in that second, he looks so still and sad it almost takes my breath away, like he is a statue or a different person. I am afraid he will not finish his sentence, but then he says, 'You looked happy.'

For a second, we just stand there in silence. Then, suddenly, Ray is back, easy, and smiling again. 'I left a

note for you one time. In the Governor's fist, you know?'

I left a note for you one time. It is impossible, too crazy to think about, and I hear myself repeating, 'You left a note for me?'

'I'm fairly sure it said something stupid. Just hi, and a smiley face, and my name. But then you stopped coming.' He shrugs. 'It's probably still there. The note, I mean. Probably just a bit of paper pulp by now.'

He left me a note. He left me a note. For me. The idea-the fact of it, the

fact that he even noticed and thought about me for more than one second is huge and overwhelming, makes my legs go tingly and my hands feel numb.

And then I am frightened. This is how it starts. Even if he is cured, even if he is safe-the fact is, I am not safe, and this is how it starts. Phase One: preoccupation; difficulty focusing; dry mouth; perspiration, sweaty palms; dizziness, and disorientation. I feel a rushing blend of sickness and relief, a feeling like finding out that everyone knows your worst secret and has known all along. And the thing, the disease, is inside of me, ready at any moment to

start working on my insides, to start poisoning me.

All this time mom was right, my teachers were right, my cousins were right. I am just like my mother.

'I have to go.' I start up the hill again, nearly sprinting now, but again he comes after me.

'Hey. Not so fast.' At the top of the hill, he reaches out and puts a hand on my wrist to stop me. His touch burns, and I jerk away quickly. 'Lena. Hold on a second.'

Even though I know I should not, I stop.

It is the way he says my name: like music.

'You don't have to be worried, okay? You don't have to be scared.' His voice is twinkling again. 'I'm not flirting with you.' My mind is spinning blindly in a panic, and I realize I do not even know what flirting is. I just know about it from textbooks; I just know that it is bad. Is it possible to flirt without knowing you are flirting? Is he flirting? My left eye goes full flutter.

'Relax,' he says, holding up both hands, a gesture like, do not be mad at me. 'I was kidding.' He turns

just slightly to the left, watching me the whole time.

Part: 11

Like her stupid

Liv's- nip is hanging out like her stupid!

Awkwardness sweeps through me.

Flirting. A dirty word. He thinks he is flirting. 'I'm not- I don't think you were- I would never think that you-' The words collide in my mouth, and now I know there is no

amount of darkness that can cover the rush of red to my face.

He cocks his head to the side. ‘Are you flirting with me, then?’

‘What? No,’ I splutter.

The moon lights up his three-pronged scar vividly: a perfect white triangle, a scar that makes you think of order and regularity. ‘I’m safe, remember? I can’t hurt you.’

He says it quietly, evenly, and I believe him. As well yet my heart will not stop its frantic winging in my chest, spinning higher and higher, until I am sure it is going to carry me off. I feel

the way I do whenever I get to the top of the Hill and can see back down Legislature Street, with the whole of Pitt. lying behind me, the streets a shimmer of greens and grays-from a distance, both beautiful and unfamiliar-just before I spread my arms and let go, trip, and skip and run down the hill, wind whipping in my face, not even trying to move, just letting gravity pull me.

Breathless; excited; waiting for the drop.

I suddenly realize how quiet it is.

The band has stopped playing, and the crowd has gone silent too. The only sound is the wind shushing over the grass. From where we are, fifty feet past the crest of the hill, the barn, and the party are invisible. I have a brief fantasy that we are the only two people out in the darkness, that we are the only two people awake and alive in the city, in the world.

Then soft strands of music begin to weave themselves up in the air, gentle, sighing, so quiet at first, I confuse the sounds for the wind. This music is different from the music that was playing earlier soft, and fragile, as

though each note is spun glass, or silken thread, looping up and back into the night air.

Once again, I am struck by how beautiful it is, as nothing- I have ever heard, and out of nowhere, I am overwhelmed by the dual desire to laugh and cry.

‘This song is my favorite.’ A cloud skitters across the moon, and shadows dance over Ray's face. He is still staring at me, and I wish I knew what he was thinking. ‘Have you ever danced?’ ‘No,’ I say, a little too forcefully.

He laughs softly. ‘It’s okay. I won’t tell you.’

Images of my mother: the softness of her hands as she spun me down the long-polished wood floors of our house, as though we were ice-skaters; the fluted quality of her voice as she sang along to the songs piping from the speakers, laughing. ‘My mother used to dance,’ I say. The words slip out, and I regret them instantly.

But then again, Ray does not question me or laugh.

He keeps watching me progressively. For a moment he seems

on the edge of saying anything at all. But then he just holds out his hand to me across space, across the dark.

‘Would you like to?’ He says… His voice is hardly audible above the wind so low it is barely a whisper.

‘Would I like to do what?’

Part: 12

Interrogations

Impersonal words from Liv-

MFC- Silly boy question: ‘So-o Liv- when did you become a smart ass…?’

She said back- ‘When I became smart and found out I had an ass!’

Kisses… (Do you want to suck on my candy cane?)

My heart is roaring, rushing in my ears, and though there are still several inches between his hand and mine, there is a zipping, humming energy that connects us, and from the heat flooding my body you would think we were pressed together, palm to palm, face to face.

‘Dance,’ he says, at the same time closing those last few inches, finding my hand, and pulling me closer,

and at that second the song hits a high note and I confuse the two impressions, of his hand and the soaring, the lifting of the music.

We dance…

Most things, even the greatest movements on earth, have their beginnings in something small. An earthquake that shatters a city might begin with a tremor, a tremble, a breath.

Music begins with a vibration. The flood that rushed into Pitt twenty years ago after two months of straight rain, that hurtled up beyond the labs

and damaged more than a thousand houses, swept up tires and trash bags and old, smelly shoes and floated them through the streets like prizes, that left a thin film of green mold behind, a stench of rotting and decay that did not go away for months, began with a trickle of water, no wider than a finger, lapping up onto the docks. And God created the whole universe from an atom no bigger than thought.

Grace's life fell apart because of a single word: sympathizer. My world exploded because of a different word: suicide.

Correction: That was the first time my world exploded.

The second time my world exploded, it was also because of a word. A word that worked its way out of my throat and danced into and out of my lips before I could think about it or stop it.

The question was: Will you meet me tomorrow?

And the word was: Yes.

Part: 13

Ecstasy

Karly- periods of euphoria; hysterical laughter and heightened energy periods of despair; lethargy changes in appetite; rapid weight loss or weight gain fixation; loss of other interests compromised reasoning skills; distortion of reality disruption of sleep patterns; insomnia or constant fatigue obsessive thoughts and actions paranoia; insecurity difficulty breathing pain in the chest, throat, or stomach difficulty swallowing; refusal to eat complete breakdown of rational faculties; erratic behavior; violent thoughts and fantasies; hallucinations

and delusions emotional or physical paralysis (partial or total)

Death-

If you fear that you or someone you know may have contracted deliria, please call the emergency line toll-free at 1-800PRECLUDE to discuss immediate intake and treatment.

I would never have understood how Hana could lie so often and so easily. But just like anything else, lying becomes easier the more you do it. Therefore, when I get home from work the next day, Carol asks me whether I do not mind having hot dogs for the

fourth straight night in a row… (The result of a shipment surplus at the Save a lot; we once went a whole two weeks having baked beans every day.)

I say that Kellie from St. Paul has invited me, and some other girls over for dinner. I do not even have to think about it. The lie just comes. Besides, I still feel sweat pricking up under my palms, my voice stays calm, and I am sure my face keeps its normal color because Carol just gives me one of her flitting smiles and says that that sounds nice. At six-thirty I get on my bike and head to North End Beach,

where Ray and I plus she agreed to meet.

There are plenty of beaches in Pitt. North End Beach is one of the least popular-which, of course, made it one of my mother's favorites. The current is stronger there than it is at Moon Shoreline or Sunset Park. I am not exactly sure why. I do not mind. I have always been a strong swimmer. After that first time when my mother released her arms from around my waist and I felt both the surging panic and the thrill, the enthusiasm- I learned quickly, and by four I was paddling out by myself past the breaks.

There are other reasons why most people avoid the North End Coastline, even though it is only a short walk down the hill from Eastern Prom, one of the most popular parks. The beach is nothing more than a short strip of rocky, gravel flecked sand. It backs up against the far side of the lab complex, where the storage and waste sheds are, which does not make for particularly pretty scenery. And when you swim out at the East End riverside you get a clear view of Yellow Bridge and the wedge of unregulated land between Pittsburgh and Yarmouth… A lot of people do not like being so close

to the Wilds. It makes them nervous. It makes me nervous too, except that there is a part of me- a tiny, a little flick of a part-that likes it. For a while, after my mom died, I used to have these fantasies that she was not dead, really, and that my father was not dead either- that they had run away to the Wilds to be together.

## Part: 14

### Unrealities

He had gone five years before her, to prepare everything, to build a little house with a woodstove and furniture hewed from tree branches. At

some point, I imagined, they would come back and get me. I even imagined my room down to the smallest detail: a dark red carpet, a little red and green patchwork quilt, a red chair.

I had the fantasy only a few times before I realized how wrong it was. If my parents had escaped to the Wilds, it would make them sympathizers, resisters. It was better than they were dead. Besides, I learned quickly that my fantasies about the Wilds were just that-make-believe, little kiddie stuff.

She says that is why the government does not bother doing anything about them, does not even acknowledge their survival.

They will die out soon enough, all of them, freeze or starve or just let the disease run its course, turn them against each other, have them raging and belligerent and clawing one another's eyes out.

The Invalids have nothing, no way of trading or getting red patchwork quilts or chairs, or anything else for that matter. She said that is already transpired- she said the

backwoods might be empty now, dark, and dead, full of only the rustle and whispers of animals.

Hanna once told me that they must live like animals, filthy, hungry, desperate.

She is right about the other stuff-about the Invalids living like animals-but she is wrong about that. They are alive, and out there, and they do not want us to forget it. That is why they stage the demonstrations.

That is why they let the cows loose in the labs. I am not jumpy until I get to East End Beach. Even though the

sun is sinking behind me, it lights the water white and makes everything sparkle. I shield my eyes from the glare and spot Ray down by the water, a long black brushstroke against all that blue. I flashback to last night, to the fingers of one of his hands just hard- pressed against my lower back, so lightly it was like I was only dreaming of them-the other hand cupping mine, dry and encouraging as a piece of wood warmed by the sun.

We danced, too, the dancing that people do at their wedding after the pairing has been formalized, but

better somehow, looser, and less abnormal.

He has his back toward me, facing the ocean, and I am glad. I feel self-conscious as I- trudge down the wobbly, salt-warped stairs that lead from the parking lot to the beach, pausing to unlace and kick off my sneakers, which I carry in one hand.

The sand is warm on my bare feet as I set off toward him.

An old man is coming up from the water, carrying a fishing pole. He shoots me a suspicious glance, then turns to stare at Ray, then looks at me

again and frowns. I open my mouth to say, ‘He’s cured,’ but the man just grunts at me as he walks past, and I cannot imagine he would bother to call the regulators, so I do not say anything.

Not that we would get in trouble if we were caught- that is what Ray meant when he said, ‘I’m safe’-but I do not want to answer a lot of questions and have my ID number run through SVS and all of that. Besides, if the regulators did haul ass out to North End Coastline to check out ‘suspicious behavior,’ only to discover it was some cured taking pity on a seventeen-year-old nobody, they would be annoyed-and

guaranteed to take it out on someone. Taking pity. I push the words out of my mind quickly, surprised by how difficult it is to even think of them.

All day I tried not to worry about why Ray would be so nice to me. I even imagined-for one brief, stupid second -that after my evaluation I would get matched with him. I had to shunt that thought aside too.

~*~

Night-

Freak me with her I said,' I said, giving him approval, taking him into my flesh, a soft offer to lunacy. My

knees were weak, but he held me with one hand, managing me with the motion of his hips. I was entirely his to do what he wanted, and he knew it and I was going to give it more than her. I no longer believed in the idea of soul mates, or love at first sight. But then again, I began to believe that a very few times in your life, if you were lucky, you might meet a celebrity who was exactly right for you.

Not because he was perfect, or because you were, but because your combined flaws were arranged in a way that allowed two separate beings to hinge together. Done- I feel- I think you

still love me, but we cannot escape the fact that I am not enough for you. I knew this was going to happen.

So-o I am not accusing you of falling in love with another girl. I am not angry, either. I should be, but I am not.

I just feel pain… a lot of pain. I thought I could envision how much this would hurt, but I was wrong so wrong, what am I the one that was wrong or you? I will love you always. When this red hair is white, I will still love you.

When the smooth softness of youth is replaced by the delicate

softness of age, I will still want to touch your skin. When your face is full of the lines of every smile you have ever smiled, of every surprise I have seen flash through your eyes when every tear you have ever cried has left its mark upon your face, I will treasure you even more, because I was there to see it all. I will share your life with you, HANNA not KELLIE, and I will love you until the last breath leaves your body or mine.

My story ended that day- she started.

I was done with the three-way cheating.

~*~

Part: 15

Semi-kaput

He never really loved me or her or anybody- when we are half-finished, we are always searching for somebody to complete us.

When, after a few years or a few months of an association, we find that we are still exasperated, we blame our partners and take up with somebody more promising. This can go

on and on- series two-timing- pending we acknowledge that while a partner can add sweet magnitudes to our lives, we, each of us, are responsible for our fulfillment.

An insignificant person can offer it to us, and to have faith in or else delude ourselves treacherously and to database for eventual failure every relationship we enter… it was just sex- no love.

That is why I ended it- or did I?

Or did he just want her?

Ernest Hemingway said- ‘The most painful thing is losing yourself in

the process of loving someone too much and forgetting that you are special too.’

So right on- right? Every couple needs to argue now and then. Just to prove that the relationship is strong enough to survive. Long-term relationships, the ones that matter, are all about weathering the peaks and the valleys. Well, I come back I do not know, should I stay, or should I go? What do you think I do well and what should I do?

I am smarter than her- and her and she too so you know what I will do.

Ray has already received his printed sheet, his recommended matches-he would have gotten it even before his cure, directly after the evaluations. He is not married yet because he is still in school, end of the story. But he will be as soon as he finishes.

~*~

It was just a fight- but it is me or her… He loves me only. We waste time looking for the perfect lover, instead of creating the perfect love. So, I will stay and take the freaking in the ass- like always.

Love- with him is better than none in high school- no?

Love is the answer, but while you are waiting for the answer, sex raises someone's loser feelings…

I went there for a week with the breakup- so yes you would do me too.

No hugging back just the nighttime friend- like before I was a teen girl- I am going to do this if I am not that girl.

I caught myself thinking about falling in love with someone whom I hoped was out there right now,

unthinking about the possibility of me, but I quickly expatriated the notion. It was that kind of thinking that landed me in this situation, to begin with. Hope can ruin you. And it is not him any longer.

Do you see why?

Part: 16

Panties

Photo of me saying ‘MFC girl with my green and white panties’- showing the text that said: ‘SEE ME P*SSY!’ ≈ Past remembers of Karly ≈

Kellie age 10- I am coming so hard! Like- um- ah-oh-ah- using my hair pink bush with my name on it, you do need one like this for this, mom and dad do get it- and it is on my dresser. I am not for my hair anymore, on my back and my knees up and down in and out I go, squirting and thick stuff too. Mum- yah!

You see me soloing for your baby.

My sis did this on cam, so she did not have to work at some fry- hole only making $2.00 an hour, when

playing with her hole she made- sh*t loads- I do it for me… like this.

And so, can you, like- it is safe. If I want, I can take cell vids and give them to my boyfriends… just say. That is up to you but, they love it.

Maybe were gay so we did have to bang a boy three times a day yet still be the popular girls. Bi girls yes- you can call us that. that high school finding yourself and feeling out others.

Of course, then I started wondering about the kind of girl he has been matched with-someone like

Hanna, I decided, with bright blond hair and an irritating ability to make even pulling her hair into a ponytail look graceful, like a choreographed dance.

There are four other people on the beach: a mother and a child, one hundred feet away, the mother sitting in a faded fabric folding chair, staring blankly toward the horizon, while the child- who is no more than three- toddlers in the waves, gets knocked over, lets out a shriek (of pain? pleasure?) and struggles back to her feet. ‘Any fool can know. The point is to understand.’

Okay is it okay not to get it in high school then?

For I do not yet I have to.

‘Hi,’ he says. ‘I’m glad you came.’

I feel shy again, stupid holding my ratty shoes in one hand. I can feel my cheeks getting hot, so I look down, drop my shoes, turn them over once in the sand with my toe. ‘I said I would, didn’t I?’

I do not mean for the words to come out so harshly and I wince, psychologically cursing myself. It is like there is a filter set up in my brain,

except instead of making things better, it twists everything around so what comes out of my mouth is wrong, different from what I was thinking.

~*~

Further, then, a couple is walking, a man and a woman, not touching. They must be married. Both have their hands clasped in front of them, and both look straight ahead, not talking and not smiling, either, but calm, as though they are each surrounded by an invisible protective bubble.

Then I am coming up behind Ray and he turns and sees me, smiles. The sun catches his hair, turns it momentarily white. Then it smolders back to its normal golden-brown color.

Thankfully, Ray laughs. ‘I just meant that you stood me up last time,’ he says.

He nods toward the sand. ‘Sit?’

‘Sure,’ I say, relieved. I feel much less awkward once we are both settled in the sand. There is less chance of falling over or doing something dumb. I draw my legs up to my chest, resting my chin on my knees. Ray

leaves a good two or three feet of space between us.

We sat in silence for a few minutes. At first, I am searching for something to say. Every beat of silence seems to stretch into infinity, and I am sure Ray must think I am a mute.

But then he flicks a half-buried seashell out of the sand and hurls it into the ocean, and I realize he is not uncomfortable at all.

I went back to be the loser girl- then freaking an asshole- I AM DONE!

Looser that is me… hope your happy Ray- you did this to me in the halls.